

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Issue 18 Spring 2016

Practicing Virtue in Teaching and Learning

Carola Binder

Haverford College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Binder, Carola "Practicing Virtue in Teaching and Learning," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 18 (2016), <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss18/5>

PRACTICING VIRTUE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Carola Binder, Assistant Professor of Economics, Haverford College

My daughter was born during my last year of graduate school. Before her birth, the two most common things people told me about babies are that (1) they don't come with an instruction manual, and (2) they change everything. *You will never be the same*, strangers and friends intoned in varying mixtures of delight and ominosity.

I was not too worried about the lack of an instruction manual. In the rush to finish my dissertation and job applications, I never found time to take classes on baby care, but felt pretty confident that Google would get me by. It's the 21st century! Countless online resources advise a new parent on how to respond to any imaginable scenario. Google is less helpful for the "change everything" part. We all know many mothers, but no two people take on this role in exactly the same way. How would I change? Who would I become?

Before I could come close to answering these questions, when my daughter was about four months old, I accepted a faculty position in the Economics Department at Haverford College, a small liberal arts college near Philadelphia. As graduation and moving day approached, the reality of this second major identity change started to sink in. I had been a student for literally as long as I could remember, and now I was going to become a professor. I had never taught my own class before and had minimal experience as a teaching assistant. As with mothering, I felt confident that I could get through the basic motions, searching for information on an as-needed basis, but I did not know what kind of teacher I would be, who I would become.

Through a unique program associated with the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Haverford and Bryn Mawr, I was assigned a student consultant for my first semester of teaching. My student consultant, a senior French major named Miriam, attended my class once per week and met with me to discuss my teaching goals, struggles, and accomplishments. The TLI recognizes that teaching requires courage to try new things, experiment, and change. Thus, a goal of this student/faculty partnership is to promote "brave spaces" that support such exploration and development.

Coincidentally, bravery and courage were on my mind before I even learned about the TLI program. Before I moved to Haverford, I undertook an intense study of the virtues at the UC San Diego Newman Center. One of the cardinal virtues, *fortitude*, is synonymous with courage or bravery. Fortitude and the other cardinal virtues—*prudence*, *temperance*, and *justice*—are central to Catholic teaching, but also have a longer history stretching back to the Greek and Roman philosophers.

I was struck by the idea of virtues as habits that must be actively practiced. Aristotle uses the word *hexis*, which refers to an active, trained habit or skill, to describe the virtues, distinguishing them from *diathesis*, a more passive disposition. Similarly, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) teaches that "A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions."

Haverford College has a Quaker background, which also emphasizes this idea of actively practicing virtue through daily choices. The introduction to Haverford's Honor Code states that Haverford's community values "improve our community only if we incorporate them into our daily lives."

Virtuosity is not an unchangeable, passive state. A person is not virtuous by disposition but by the choices she makes, even about the smallest matters, each and every day. I had always thought of myself as an inherently "good student," but in fact I was a virtuous student through the habits I actively developed and practiced. Recognizing this made the transition to my roles as parent and professor seem less scary. I was not just going to find out whether or not I was a good mother or a good teacher. Instead I could actively practice choosing to do good, with the virtues as a guide. Teaching and learning (and mothering) require giving the best of ourselves and pursuing the good in concrete actions.

The ancient Greeks and later Christian philosophers called prudence the charioteer of the other virtues, *Auriga virtutum*, because it guides the way the other virtues are put into action. While today prudence has taken on a connotation of cautiousness, is it more accurately the wisdom and knowledge of what is good. St. Thomas Aquinas describes prudence as "right reason in action." The second cardinal virtue, justice, "disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good" (CCC 1807). Temperance "provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable" (CCC 1809).

Prudence, justice, and temperance were all part of the TLI New Faculty Pedagogy Seminar. The readings and discussions were explicitly designed to develop our knowledge and wisdom. The seminar also implicitly focused on justice and temperance, for example in our consideration of diversity and equity and of finding balance in our careers and lives.

Most relevant to this special issue on brave spaces is the remaining virtue, fortitude. When one has settled on a right path of action, fortitude "ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good" (CCC 1808). Fortitude, or bravery, has a special role among the cardinal virtues. Knowing what is right and just is useless without the fortitude to actually do it. Stepping into the classroom is a major test of fortitude. Doing what you believe is best for the students is rarely the easiest or most popular course of action. However, I found that having Miriam in the room strengthened my resolve to pursue the goals we established for me and for my students.

For example, I place high priority on helping students learn to write well. The ability to communicate clearly and precisely is more important than any of the specific content I teach. I noticed very problematic tendencies in my students' early written assignments, including vague language, incorrect grammar, and confusing syntax. I wanted to address these issues, but was surprised by how hesitant and anxious I felt about bringing them up in class. I had no training in writing instruction and had not taken an English composition class since high school! Plus, my students were upperclassmen, so maybe all of their previous professors considered their writing acceptable, and I had unrealistic expectations. I also worried that the students would take offense if I suggested that their basic grammar was incorrect and that they would be upset if I took time away from teaching about economics to teach about writing.

Miriam helped support me in the face of all of these anxieties. She affirmed my qualification and capability to teach the writing skills that are important in my field. She also reassured me that my expectations for student writing were not at all unrealistic. She reminded me that I had the authority and the responsibility to provide critical feedback to my students and suggested that they would be more likely to appreciate than to resent being corrected. Encouraged and with renewed fortitude, I developed a lesson on writing in economics, based largely on Deirdre McCloskey's *Economical Writing*.¹ We went around the room reading selections from McCloskey's executive summary out loud. She presents, and quite colorfully explains, a numbered list of rules, including "Impenetrable theoretical utterances have prestige in economics, but shouldn't," and "Cultivate the habit of mentally rearranging the order of words and phrases in every sentence you write."

After we read and discussed these writing tips, I asked the students to spend ten minutes writing a three-sentence explanation of a topic we had been studying, the fiscal multiplier. Then I asked if they would be willing to type their responses on the computer hooked up to the projector screen so that we could read and edit them together. It was encouraging that all four students were willing to do this—I think the classroom was a "brave space" for them too by this point in the second half of the semester. We painstakingly rearranged and reworded the responses, then combined the best parts of each to create a well-crafted short paragraph. I did not always know the technical explanations for grammatical problems, but I demonstrated how to use one of McCloskey's tips: "Use your ear." At no point did the students seem offended or resentful.

Thinking back, I can't actually remember whether Miriam attended class on the day of the writing lesson. The brave space she helped create did not depend on her physical presence in the classroom. My dialogues with her throughout the semester helped shape the dialogues I can have with myself, encouraging "firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good." The student consultant program will have a lasting impact on my active practice of fortitude and the other virtues.

¹ Deirdre N. McCloskey.1999. *Economical Writing*. Waveland Pr Inc., Second Edition.